

THE OXFORD TIMES, FRIDAY JUNE 3 1960

**The Oxford Times drops in on
WHEATLEY**

The village that has changed a lot over the years

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In this series we try not to cheat. The idea is to “drop in” on people, have a chat if we’re welcome (everyone, so far, has treated us kindly) and try to convey to you our impressions about their village.

We have carefully avoided reading up our subjects. Our information, we decided, should come straight from the villagers’ mouths.

In Wheatley we met with some difficulty. An alarming (for our purposes) number of people were camera-shy, and many of the people we were advised to visit were not at home.

One of the absentees was Dr W. O. Hassall, an assistant librarian at the Bodleian Library who lives in the Manor House at the western end of the High Street. But Dr Hassall edited 1,000 years of Wheatley’s history for the Oxfordshire Record Society in 1956, and his book was available, so we cheated.

Bricks and Stone

In this way we learn that the present village sits on a geological fault which put stone near heavy clay: a fact enabling Wheatley to provide bricks for Keble College and stone for Merton.

The agricultural associations of Wheatley are obvious from its name. Dr Hassall’s book provided a couple of literary clues. The poet Milton stayed at the Manor House which his wife’s uncle rebuilt in 1601, and Dr Johnson (with Boswell tagging along as usual) visited Wheatley and the Scottish poet William Mickle in 1784.

Boswell called Wheatley “a very pretty country place a few miles from Oxford” – a description not strikingly appropriate today.

But then, as we were told by 78 year old Mr William Tombs (pronounced Toms in Wheatley), “The village has changed a lot over the years. During the last 40, for example, it has grown tremendously. I should say that, next to Kidlington, it has grown more than any other parish in the county.”

Mr Tombs – sorry Tombs – should know. For 30 of those years he was Chairman of the Parish Council, and for 27 of them an Oxfordshire County Councillor. “Plenty of land here has been sold for £1,000 an acre or more,” he said. “Twenty-seven acres have been built on at the east end of the village. At the west end 24 acres have been developed. The average is eight houses to an acre and the majority have been built in the last few years. The highest population when I was a boy was about 1,300. Then it dropped back to 900. The latest information I got from the county Council four years ago was 1,600. I should say it has grown now to nearly 3,000. Most of the men work in Oxford.”

As a parting shot Mr Tombs said again: “Wheatley is very different now from what it was.”

“In what way?” asked Peter.

“Why the people ain’t so good: not half so good, my boy,” was the answer. “Young people are so different today from when I was a lad. They get too much.”

Expanding firm.

Opposite the contracting firm of G. R. Nixey Ltd – founded only 11 years ago but now employing some 50 people and about to seek further scope for its extensive range of demolition, levelling, excavation and other machinery by opening up a depot at Luton – we visited the Railway Hotel and got a conflicting viewpoint from the licensee, Mr E. Ratcliffe.

Adjoining his premises when he took over was “a large building doing nothing at all.” He decorated it himself, dubbed it Ed’s Saloon and began running dances. “We have got to cater for the young people,” he said. “All the young people here are friends of mine. This is a young people’s pub and they are a grand lot. If ever I need any help it is offered without my asking.”

He opened Ed’s Saloon on New Year’s Eve and it was an immediate success: “We get anything up to 100, late teens and early twenties mostly.”

By the railway station is the sawmill opened by the Avery family in 1880. Its former owner, 91 year old Mr Harry Avery, who still lives in the village, and who, according to Mr Tombs, was one of the three hardest working men in the village (Mr Tombs and 81 year old Mr Tom Munt were the other two) used to run the mill with his four brothers.

The sawmill, bought in 1934 by a Stokenchurch firm and largely concerned with making chair seats for the new owners, is changing with the rest of Wheatley.

Old Steam Engine

For 60 years a huge log-saw was powered by a 60 year old steam engine. Mr A. Preston, the foreman, told us that the engine’s whistle had been the timepiece for the surrounding area when it was blown at lunch and teatime.

“You could hear it six to 10 miles away if you got the wind the right way,” he said.

We mention the whistle in the past tense because the sawmill is being converted to electricity, and on the day we called the whistle was blown for the last time.

The immense change in the face of Wheatley was forcibly put to us in our next two calls. Miss V Flood, who came to the village to teach in 1913 and retired nearly 8 years ago, told us emphatically, “It isn’t like the same place. I have lived here in this little bungalow since 1929. Nobody else lived down here in those days. It was known as “Muddy Lane.” All the private houses and bungalows and the council houses round about here were built not many years ago.”

Miss Ellen Gunn who lives in All Souls Cottage in the High Street remembers that in her youth, “we were told that the bull-baiting and cock-fighting took place about 70 years ago where the King George VI playing field by the Roundhouse now stands.”

She remembers “almost all the houses being built,” brick-making kilns, a stone quarry, the fishmonger from Thame, and the carpet man from Long Crendon paying visits and announcing their arrival with handbells.

She remembers, too, when villagers had to walk to Oxford for hospital treatment, “and the women used to walk off at 7 am to do their shopping, returning about noon,” said Miss Gunn. “We are living in quite a different age now.”

Change was again the keynote of our conversation when we met Mr Arthur Vale, licensee of The White Hart, for many years in charge of the hounds for the South Oxfordshire Hunt, and before that Huntsman to a Cambridge millionaire. He remembers one season when 58 brace of foxes were killed, and told us, “I saw the happiest of the hunting days.”

Last word

For a last word or two on Wheatley, we contacted Mr F.C. Anson, Headmaster of the Secondary School and Parish Council chairman.

He said “Wheatley has grown rapidly since the war. The 1958 Registrar-General’s return showed a population of 1,994. Since then, five private estates have been built as well as individual houses, and the population is now estimated to be over 2,300. Further development will add approximately 200 houses.

“When the A40 is moved it is popularly supposed that the land between the new road through Holton Park and the present A40 will also be developed. In that case, one may look forward to a village of some 4,000. Bullingdon R.D.C.” he said, “had sewer extension work costing £33,000 in hand.”

We asked about the youth of Wheatley. “They are catered for by various Church of England and Congregational activities,” said Mr Anson, “as well as the Youth Club which, during the winter, had 30 – 40 young people.”

Nothing but Praise

Mr A Young, the youth leader, left the district last year and, though there was “nothing but praise” for the way the youth committee had taken over, the adult committee are “most concerned that they have not been able to find a leader for this very go-ahead organisation which is an excellent job and deserves the fullest support of the village.”

Mr Anson thought that St Mary’s Church should also be mentioned. “Nearly £4,000 is required for the restoration of the roof, and the disintegrating stonework,” he said.

Captions to photographs

1. Wheatley's famous Roundhouse, years ago used for drunks and minor criminals. The village stocks which used to be fixed nearby, are now stored in the Roundhouse.
2. Mr William Tombs, Chairman of Wheatley Parish Council for more than 30 years, and Mr Tom Munt – two of the three men (says Mr Tombs) who were the hardest working in the village.
3. A scene in the sawmill, owned from 1880 to 1956 by the Avery family.
4. Old cottages in Wheatley. (Louse Hill)
5. Mr Arthur Vale, at the White Hart, was first whip and kennel-huntsman for the South Oxfordshire Hunt for 11 seasons.
6. The local sawmill's conversion to electricity means the retirement of the old steam whistle which was "a time-piece for all the village." Mr Maurice Ashfield, who stoked the old steam engine for 15 years, blows the whistle for the last time.
7. Mr E. Ratcliffe, licensee of the Railway Hotel, converted a disused building next door into a dance-hall and clubroom for young people in the village.